

25 pct. of water systems flunk

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"Don't drink the water" may be advice to live by in many areas of Utah.

Statistics from the Utah Safe Drinking Water Committee show that 25 percent of the state's 400 public water systems do not comply with state and federal water quality regulations.

In 1982, the committee found 550 water quality violations from around the state. It also noted 2,980 instances of public systems failing to even monitor their water quality.

Almost all those violations come from small water systems in rural areas, said Robert B. Hilbert, chairman of the Safe Drinking Water Committee.

"Most of those agencies don't understand the regulations, our committee or the reasons for them. They say, 'We've been doing things this way for 100 years and nobody's ever died, so why change now,'" he said.

However, there have been several instances of diseases spread through water systems in the state and some suits are pending on them, Hilbert said.

"It would look great for the state if hundreds of skiers in areas like Park City or Brian Head suddenly got sick because of the water and went home and told their friends about it. We have had both of those areas before the board on violations in the past," Hilbert said.

Residents in the state are highly mobile and deserve assurances that water in rural areas is safe, Hilbert said.

"Rural residents deserve to have just as safe a water supply as people living in urban areas like Salt Lake City with all its engineers. They don't deserve to be treated

like second-class citizens," he said.

The Safe Water Drinking Committee was organized a few years ago by the Legislature to oversee efforts by the State Department of Health to upgrade water systems in the state and implement federally mandated water quality standards.

Its success has been mixed.

"Many small agencies resist our efforts," Hilbert said.

The committee has the judicial power to impose up to \$1,000 a day in fines for failure to meet required water standards. If a water system willfully violates an order from the

committee, it can be fined up to \$5,000 a day.

"Our goal isn't to impose large fines, it is to correct problems. We want to work with the agencies. We tell them what is required to upgrade their systems and if they cooperate with us, we usually won't fine them," he said.

However, the committee has had to file suit against some systems to make them comply with regulations and is not popular with many small water agencies.

Rep. Hardy Redd, R-LaSal, owns a small water system and is one

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those who has been critical of some of the practices of the Safe Drinking Water Committee in the past.

In a recent committee meeting, Redd said requirements from the committee ordering chlorination on his system were unnecessary.

"We have good-quality water. I think we've done a lot to clean up the water supply in our part of town," he said.

"You don't do anything about people in downtown LaSal who sink wells in their back yards next to septic tanks that are next to more wells and more septic tanks," he said.

Hilbert said, "We don't have any jurisdiction over someone who sinks a well in their back yard and doesn't supply water to anyone else. But, local boards of health do."

Health Department officials told Redd that if he reduced the number

Some of those who do so cheat by adding chlorine to kill bacteria to give the appearance of high-grade water, Hilbert said.

"That is foolish because closing your eyes to a problem only hurts you and your customers," he said.

Local health departments do make occasional spot checks on water quality to confirm other water quality checks.

"We require different numbers of samples according to how many connections a system has. A small system is required to send only one sample a month. Large ones send up to 70 samples a month," he said.

The state charges the systems \$5 to process each sample. Redd said the state should pay that cost because it requires the tests.

Redd also said many of the improvements required by the committee are expensive for the small companies and may not be necessary.

Hilbert said the committee is sympathetic to the concerns of water agencies and realizes many of them face strict budgetary constraints.

"Many small cities have budget problems and struggle in setting priorities. Unfortunately, water is given a low priority by many of them," he said.

"Six of the 11 members of the committee come from agencies that the committee regulates. They are sympathetic to the needs of the agencies," he said. Hilbert himself is general manager of the large Salt Lake County Water Conservancy District.

Hilbert said he feels the best way to solve water quality problems in the state is by more training of water system operators and better education of the public to bring support to upgrading water systems.

The committee is now pushing

for the passage of SB5, which would require certification by the committee of operators of public water systems.

The bill passed the Senate 21-1, and is now in the House. Redd has spoken against the bill in a luncheon sponsored by the League of Women Voters and has pledged to fight it.

Hilbert said the bill would require operators to go through basic training on the operation of systems and to take a test on that training.

"We would have four different types of certification based on the complexity of the systems. Operators of smaller agencies would need to know the basics like how to chlorinate, how to fix broken pipes and how to take water samples.

"Operators of larger agencies would really need to know their stuff, though," Hilbert said.

